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Abstract

The UK coalition government introduced the Community Organisers Programme (COP) in 2010, providing state funding to train community organisers in England for the first time. This article presents a case study in north-east England, exploring the implementation of the programme. It illustrates the challenges and contradictions faced by trainee community organisers (TCOs) and suggests lessons for community practitioners and policy makers of all political complexions in the UK and other countries.

Key words

community organising, neoliberalism, localism, coalition government

Introduction

Community organising as a grassroots, non-state activity has become increasingly popular in the UK in recent years (Beck and Purcell, 2013; Bunyan, 2013). This growing interest was partly sparked by the election of a former community organiser, Barak Obama, as US president in 2009. Indeed, Obama's election campaign deployed community organising methods (Taylor and Wilson, 2016). These developments drew British media attention to Citizens UK (formerly London Citizens) who have used community organising methods in England since the 1990s. Its campaigns (especially around the Living Wage) were widely reported in the media and subsequently noticed by national politicians (Bunyan, 2013; Wills, 2012). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, formed in 2010, harnessed community organising approaches with its Community Organisers Programme (COP). Offering central government funding to train community organisers in England, this was a groundbreaking programme, as Dimberg and Fisher (2015, p. 96) explain: 'no other nation has ever officially and explicitly trained and hired so many community organisers'.

There is considerable academic literature on community organising in Britain, some focused on the genesis of the coalition's COP (Taylor, 2011; Bunyan, 2013; Fisher and Dimberg, 2016). While this highlights challenges for community organising in general, there is little academic literature about the implementation of the COP (but see Taylor and Wilson, 2016; Fisher et al., 2014); how the COP worked in practice and the experiences and perspectives of practitioners. This is significant as understanding how the COP worked is important for assessing the impact of the coalition's 'Big Society' and localism agendas. Additionally, learning from the experiment with community

organising offers lessons for policy makers and community practitioners in the UK and further afield. This article explores the micro-context of practice (Newman and Clarke, 2013) presenting a case study in north-east England exploring in depth what happens when organisers are 'hired and trained and put into the field' (Fisher and Dimberg, 2016, p. 103) during one of the final cohorts of the COP. In so doing, we aim to build on evidence from a national evaluation of COP (Cameron et al., 2015) and COP learning advisors' research (for example, Imagine, 2015a; 2015b).

This article is divided into four sections, the first of which presents the policy context. The second introduces the COP and how Alinsky-style organising was adapted to the English context. The third discusses our methodology. Finally, we turn to our findings, identifying four challenges or dilemmas that confronted the state-trained community organisers: short-termism; moving from listening to mobilising; being autonomous or embedded and aiming for consensus or conflict. We conclude by summarising our findings and suggesting lessons from the COP for future community organising.

The context: neoliberalism and the turn to community

The COP in England developed in the context of a neoliberal agenda pursued by a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. The coalition adopted a neoliberal analysis of the welfare state, claiming it was too big, bureaucratic and doing too much for citizens, thereby creating state-dependency and negating personal responsibility (Hancock et al, 2012). It pursued an austerity programme of unprecedented cuts to public expenditure that had a deleterious impact on public services at local level (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Hastings et al., 2015). A shrinking and reorganised welfare state demanded a greater reliance on markets and the private sector as well as the local voluntary and community sector (VCS). But, to promote neoliberal 'individual entrepreneurial freedoms' (Harvey, 2006, p.2), the coalition also turned to individuals and community.

This turn to community was not new. Since the 1980s, governments of both major parties have regarded the idea of community as the solution to social problems (DeFilippis et al, 2010; Fremeaux, 2005; Shaw, 2007). While a 'remarkably resilient notion' (Hancock et al., 2010, p. 360), 'community' has multiple meanings. It is difficult to define and yet used in everyday settings which makes it beguiling to politicians and policy-makers. The coalition's appropriation of community as a panacea was evident in its 'Big Society' and localism agendas. Both encouraged individuals to become active citizens, asserting their rights over local decisions, volunteering, and drawing on assets within their communities, to help themselves rather than turning to the state (Cameron, 2010a). This was part of Prime Minister David Cameron's strategy to widen electoral appeal by de-toxifying the so-called

'nasty party', associating it with a more 'compassionate conservatism' rather than its Thatcherite legacy (Newman, 2014, p.3294). Academics have tended to regard the 'Big Society', in particular, with considerable scepticism, dismissing it as a 'fig-leaf' for public expenditure reductions (Corbett and Walker, 2013).

The reality on the ground could hardly have been more ill-suited to these agendas. As Corbett and Walker (2013) suggest, central government expected communities to replace the state whilst ignoring the structures that foster economic and social inequalities, which in turn make it difficult for all to participate. Reduced welfare spending increased inequalities amongst geographical communities and social groups (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014). The most disadvantaged communities were consequently left 'managing their own exclusion and open to blame if they fail' (Taylor, 2012, p. 21), further exacerbating inequalities. Fisher and DeFilippis (2015, p. 375) question how people can challenge power through community organising when 'they seem overwhelmed by the pace and demands of daily living not to mention the challenges faced in mounting social change'. Cameron (2010b), however, refused to accept that there was no appetite for widespread community participation, seeing no reason why every adult would not become part of a community group. Cameron's optimism eschewed a deficit model of community development for an asset-based approach; an approach Macleod and Emejulu (2014, p.437) suggest is indicative of the 'community face' of neoliberalism which 'risks shifting responsibility for social problems from the state onto individuals and communities' and ignores the role of the state and structural solutions.

Nevertheless, the turn to community under neoliberalism is complex. Newman (2014) urges caution in viewing neoliberalism as hegemonous, regarding it instead as a process of contradictory tendencies resulting in variations across geographical spaces and scales that offer opportunities for agency and resistance. Indeed, Williams et al. (2014) and Featherstone et al. (2012) argue that the 'Big Society' and localism agendas incorporated contradictory tendencies that provided opportunities for more progressive action, solutions and resistance. The potentially contradictory tendencies of a neo-liberal agenda suggest that the COP was not necessarily doomed to cooptation and negation. Fisher and Dimberg (2016, p. 104) claim that the COP had 'potential and significance', although they offer limited empirical evidence in support. Having discussed the context, we now focus on the ideational development of the COP.

The Community Organisers Programme

The COP provided state funding to train 5,000 community organisers. This included five hundred paid, trainee community organisers (TCOs) who would then recruit and train 4,500 volunteer community organisers (VCOs). A competitive bidding process was announced in 2010 and two national civil society organisations working in partnership were commissioned to deliver the COP: Locality led and managed the programme and RE:generate delivered the training. ~~Locality emerged from two existing and well-established third sector organizations and~~ This was the first ~~time~~ ~~RE:generate's model of training had~~ been ~~not yet been tested on such a large scale (Imagine, 2015a; 2014). TCOs were based in local VCS organisations known as host organisations (HOs). TCOs were then allocated to small geographical areas (known as 'patches') in the poorest districts in England (Cameron, 2015) with the aim of working '…closely with communities to identify local leaders, projects and opportunities, and empower the local community to improve their local area' (Cabinet Office, 2011, n.p).~~

Both the government and Locality explicitly referenced Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire whose approaches aim to resist and challenge authority. Considering the coalition's state-shrinking neoliberal mission, this was surprising (Beck and Purcell, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Bunyan, 2013; Taylor and Wilson, 2016). Community organising is traditionally associated with the left, although it is a contested and complex concept with a range of approaches in practice and theoretical underpinnings that can render it compatible with conservative traditions (Taylor, 2011; Fisher and DeFilippis, 2015).

Debates about Alinsky's ideas illustrate this complexity. Alinsky (1971) adopted a community organising model seeking power through political activity. Community organisers should bring together civil society organisations, families and individuals to establish 'mass organisations' which 'seize power' by promoting dialogue with decision-makers to change policy and practice (Alinsky, 1971, p.3). Ostensibly, Alinsky appeared to be on the left; accused of being a communist (Beck and Purcell, 2013), he argued for 'revolution' in his seminal *Rules for Radicals.* Yet Alinsky aimed to 'start from where the world is … working within the system' (1971, p. xix) developing broad-based community organisations founded on pragmatism and compromise that adapt according to local contexts. Notwithstanding this, Bunyan (2013) claims that community organising based on Alinsky's principles has the potential to be a radical, authentic approach. However, Alinsky's approach has also been criticised for its potential to exacerbate inequalities in relation to women (Stall and Stoecker, 1998; Robson and Spence, 2011) and people from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups (Franklin, 2013). Macleod and Emejulu (2015) note that by the 1980s some in US community development viewed this conflict-approach to community organising as no longer relevant or

effective. In the UK, however, Alinsky's broad-based community organising methods gained renewed traction due to the success of London Citizens (Bunyan, 2013; Wills, 2012), which inspired the emergence of 'Citizens' groups across England and Wales (see Citizens UK, 2018).

In theory and practice there is a spectrum of community organising using different strategies that vary in their approaches to conflict or co-operation; their degree of autonomy and/or dependency on outside resources; their focus on local or (inter)national issues; their longevity and endurance (Hunter, 2007). Beck and Purcell (2013) add to this list the extent to which community organisers work in or outside the system (there is a centralised model with one key, identifiable institution directing the organising or a dispersed model whereby a number of local organisations work together at local level); who defines the issues (the community organisation or local people) and, finally, whether there is informal or formal learning. Most of these different, often contradictory but occasionally complimentary, strategies were evident in our case study.

The COP combined an Alinsky-style approach with Freire's critical pedagogy and community animation (Locality, 2010). Previous government community programmes used Freire's ideas (Mayo et al., 2012) which were tailored to inform the COP (Freire, 1996; Locality, 2010). The result of combining Freire and Alinsky's ideas created a hybrid; a less radical and more consensual approach (Bunyan, 2013) that Fisher and Dimberg (2016, p. 100) describe as the 'moderate middle' of community organising strategies. Following the methodology section we turn to how this style of community organising worked in practice.

Methodology

The empirical basis of this article is data collected during an evaluation of the COP in one Labour controlled local authority district in north-east England. It draws on semi-structured interviews with six TCOs and two host managers. Participants were interviewed twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the year contract (July 2014-July 2015). Interviews covered their experiences of the COP. Nationally, fourteen cohorts of community organisers were trained in groups between October 2011 and June 2015 (Cameron et al., 2015). Other evaluation (Cameron et al., 2015) and research (Imagine 2015a; 2015b; 2014) focusses predominantly on the earlier cohorts. Our case study adds to this research by examining one area included in one of the final cohorts. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity. The six TCOs had a range of experiences and backgrounds: half lived in the local area and half in nearby towns and cities; five were aged 18-25; four were educated to degree level; and all six had previous experience of community work and volunteering in VCS organisations. Each TCO was allocated a 'patch' within the area. Locality set TCOs four targets:

first, to listen to at least five-hundred people in their patch on doorsteps; second, to recruit at least nine volunteer community organisers (VCOs); third, to initiate between three and five community projects building on local concerns and, fourth, to establish community holding teams of VCS organisations and other local leaders to listen, research, plan and take coordinated action (Cameron et al., 2015). We now turn to our empirical analysis, identifying the challenges and contradictions facing state-funded community organisers.

Delivering state-funded community organising

Our analysis identifies four challenges or dilemmas for TCOs. The first, and main challenge, was the short-term nature of the COP. TCOs were employed on year-long training contracts with the possibility of extension if they secured matched funding from their HO or another local organisation. From the outset host managers recognised the problem of short-term funding, which provided limited time for organisers to make a meaningful contribution, and impacted particularly on TCOs new to the area. All TCOs struggled to achieve their targets within the time frame. TCOs felt there was not enough time to gain the trust of residents and to motivate people to volunteer or take action. TCO Dan, for example, felt 'it should have been the twelve months training then another year working for Locality doing the job, and then progression.' This issue of short termism is reflected in national research, which also found that TCOs thought a second year was necessary to build self-confidence and relationships with local organisations (Imagine, 2015a; 2015b).

Combining training and organising was a challenge. TCOs' responses to the training were mixed. In initial interviews, training was viewed as adequate but sometimes vague. Others felt it did not prepare them fully for the job on the ground and that they needed more practice before starting. This finding, too, is reflected in national research (Imagine, 2015c). The COP's training was premised on Freire's principle of learning through dialogue and reflective practice (Locality, 2010; Freire, 1996); encouraged through monthly supervisions and national network meetings with other community organisers, residentials and online training. In our final interviews, most TCOs understood that continuous learning was the key to community organising, which meant learning from mistakes and having the opportunity for discretion to work out the best approach.

In their final interviews, all TCOs felt they had made little lasting impact on the community. But all claimed an improvement in their knowledge of and skills in community organising. Only one of our six TCOs progressed to the second year and was employed by their HO. A second TCO secured employment as a community organiser in a VCS organisation using ACORN[i] community organising methods. At the end of the evaluation, four TCOs had not secured positions (due to conflicts

discussed below). This progression rate is much lower than the national average of 60% (with a range across the cohorts between 41% and 79%) (Cameron et al., 2015, p. 97).

The second challenge was listening to and then mobilising residents. The COP's method, called 'Roots Solutions-Listening Matters' (RSLM), emphasised listening to and then supporting people in their communities to develop collaborative solutions (RE:generate, 2009). This was more akin to asset-based community development than Alinksy-inspired community organising, as it favoured resolving issues by building relations with stakeholders, rather than fomenting conflict and challenging those in power (Fisher and Dimberg, 2016). The listenings were based on knocking on doors and asking residents to respond to questions developed by RE:generate.

The listenings method seemed quite prescriptive and constraining for some TCOs, as it focused people's minds on the local. TCOs found that most people quite liked their neighbourhood and did not want to change it. RSLM's geographical focus, as Anna suggested, led people into 'thinking quite narrowly'. Tom reiterated this, remarking that people spoke about 'what's on my street and what I can see from my window'. Although this sometimes led to thinking about bigger 'societal' issues (as Tom described them), three TCOs thought that focusing on the local may have prevented discussion of other national or global issues such as the economy or employment. Similar to Taylor and Wilson's (2016) findings, the most common issues raised were local environmental concerns such as litter and untidy parks and streets. Cuts to council services were also discussed. Echoing Mills and Robson's (2010) critique of community organising approaches for their lack of attention to structural inequalities, Jane suggested that the approach excluded discussion of particular communities: 'you don't think of [a] religious community or… gender, age, none of that comes into play'. In other areas TCOs have been able to enter into a dialogue during listenings to deepen engagement with structural issues and inequalities and to question people's values and beliefs (Taylor and Wilson, 2016). In our case study this was not so evident and listening to what Anna called 'people's unsavoury opinions' was a difficult part of the job. Listening was not always a straight-forward process. Tom experienced doors slammed in his face and verbal abuse. Consequently, the door-knocking process could be quite demotivating for TCOs. By the final interviews, TCOs recognised the importance of beginning the process by listening and that '[p]eople value being listened to' (Taylor and Wilson, 2016, p. 225).

TCOs found it difficult to transition from listening to mobilising residents; undermining David Cameron's ambition to mobilise a 'neighbourhood army' of active residents (King et al., 2010). Theoretically, training prepared TCOs to 'activate' passive citizens by encouraging residents to organise meetings and/or work as volunteer community organisers. While many residents raised

similar issues on the doorstep, no one wanted to take the lead. TCOs like Dan referred to the 'golden rule' of the method, namely 'don't do for others what they can do themselves'. Though TCOs accepted this as important, they also regarded it as frustrating and unrealistic. John explained: 'One of the failures… is… even though I tell them about how I'm here to support them it's quite daunting for anybody… to even think about setting anything up, even just a youth club… or a litter pick group.'

TCOs understood the difficulties of encouraging residents to become VCOs, especially in poorer areas. Each TCO managed to recruit two or three VCOs each and were expected to teach them about community organizing. Since TCOs did not have a full understanding of the method themselves, they felt unprepared for this. Although training for VCOs was developed towards the end of the COP and ran in fourteen areas in 2014/15 (Imagine, 2015d) this was not mentioned by our TCOs. TCOs also found it difficult to mobilise individuals into forming new community groups, which was partly reflective of the listenings, where questions prompted an individualised response (Taylor and Wilson, 2016). TCOs learnt that by distributing newsletters they could build relationships and develop a more collective response within the community. Community meetings, some very well attended, were held about local parks, for example. But these did not develop into long-lasting projects, nor did they grow into the expected 'community holding teams' (a concept that remained opaque and not well understood by TCOs throughout) . This was another problem observed across the programme nationally (Cameron et al., 2015).

The flaws in the COP offered room for agency and initiative and, in this case study and nationally, TCOs often adapted the process to meet their targets (Imagine, 2015c). Jane explained: 'I bend the rules sometimes, not break them … I make them a bit more flexible.' Anna concurred, as long as the underlying principles guided the process, 'I think it's probably alright to… make it up as you go along a bit'. In the final interviews, most TCOs were much more comfortable with their own approaches to building relationships but the challenge of how to mobilise people around common issues remained.

The third contradiction was the degree to which TCOs were autonomous or embedded, within both HOs and existing structures in their local area. TCOs were physically based in HOs and supported by staff in these organisations (particularly the managers). But the COP encouraged TCOs to be autonomous rather than work with existing organisations and structures. In their encounters with residents, TCOs asserted their independence, particularly from the local council. They saw their independence as important and something that residents valued. Tom explained: 'it's that… fresh approach of an independent person coming in who listens to people rather than somebody from a statutory body or something like that coming in and saying, "I think you should do this or this is what we're gonna do" … I think that has been something that has been most welcomed.'

Government-funded community work is not unusual in England, and in other countries~~;~~, as ~~as in other countries and~~ community development practitioners ~~and VCS organisations~~ have long managed the dilemmas of working both 'in and against the state' (LEWRG, 1980; Meade et al., 2016; Taylor, 2012). ~~It was thus not surprising that~~ TCOs did not raise their being paid by the state as an issue, nor did they ~~seem to~~ see ~~regard their dependency on~~ state funding as precluding their independence. In contrast ~~On the other hand,~~ HOo~~o~~s, ~~observed that~~ thought TCOs were ~~viewed as~~ paid for by ~~paid by, and embedded within, the politics of~~ national government for ideological ends, particularly as this was a pre-general election period. As Kim (host manager) explained: 'it would look like half a million people had been listened to across England in that time which would've sounded great at an upcoming election… especially since most of them are happening in Labour constituencies.' Nonetheless~~Of course~~, ~~This was despite~~ HOs had cho~~o~~sen~~ing~~ to ~~take~~ participate in the COP and recruited ~~ing~~ their own TCOs.

The issue most troubling to both TCOs and HOs was that the RSLM method encouraged TCOs to work autonomously from their HO and established VCS organisations. This seemed to work against Alinsky's idea of creating power through building community alliances within civil society and is very different to Citizens UK's approach to bring local organisations together. As TCO Tom explained, they could 'develop relationships with groups but where possible try to organise people separately from that and try not to reinforce… and appear as if you're working for a group.' This was difficult to navigate as TCOs generally praised the support from their HO and thought that they benefitted from their local host's knowledge, networks, experience and skills.

HOs initially welcomed their role and supported the TCOs. By the end of the year there were mixed feelings and some frustration. Imagine's (2015b) research found that some HOs were unclear about what was expected of them and would have liked to be more involved in the development of the programme. This was reflected by our HOs who felt that they were not valued sufficiently by the COP managers. At the outset, HOs viewed TCOs as a means of bringing additional resources into a sector suffering austerity and funding cuts. They envisaged TCOs working less autonomously, building on existing networks and strengthening local community organisations.

HOs did not expect to co-opt TCOs. Rather, they welcomed the ethos of the community organising and its different way of working to reach those not already active in the community. It also reminded HOs of how they worked in the past and was consequently seen as 'going back to basics', an approach that HOs in national assessments of the programme also valued (Imagine, 2014; Imagine and Locality, 2012: np). Both host managers commented that door knocking and delivering leaflets was not so much new as forgotten. Echoing DeFilippis et al.'s (2010) argument about community

development becoming more conservative, one host manager, Kim, suggested that they had stopped being proactive since the 1980s and, perhaps, door-knocking 'might have paid dividends over the years'.

The need for independence from local organisations perplexed the TCOs, particularly within the context of cuts to local services. TCOs encountered worried individuals who were already involved in community organisations and feared these would close due to lack of funding. Because these were already 'active' individuals involved in existing organisations, TCOs felt pressure not to work with them. TCOs thus struggled to respond to residents' anxieties whilst remaining loyal to their RSLM training. As Jane explained: 'people want to keep the building then sometimes it feels like you're getting told, "don't use the buildings, set up something new", but then that doesn't always make sense.' In practice, TCOs were flexible, by the final interviews, only one TCO claimed to have retained a 'pure' RSLM approach, namely avoiding working with existing groups and focusing on developing new groups. Others broadened their approach as they gained more experience.

A further contradiction related to TCOs' continuing employment. To progress to the second year, TCOs had to obtain part-funding from a local organisation (usually half the overall salary or at least a quarter contribution towards the salary and additional payments 'in kind'), which would be 'matched' by the government. TCOs and host managers highlighted the paradox that TCOs were encouraged to work autonomously from these potential future employers thereby lessening their chances of identifying such an opportunity for progression. This dilemma was also identified within COP research (Imagine, 2015a). The realisation that TCOs were encouraged to work autonomously and not support existing organisations was a disappointment to our HO staff, board members and service users. This resulted in conflict within HOs and resistance to TCOs that further reduced the possibility of their progression.

Clashes with the local council also negatively impacted on the perception of TCOs within HOs. This discord is part of our fourth dilemma, whether to engage in strategies based on consensus or conflict (Hunter, 2007). As Bunyan (2013, p. 130) notes, a radical community organising approach 'understands that social change and social justice are as much about struggle, tension and conflict as they are about consensus and co-operation'. In their bid to run the COP, Locality provided an example of their previous work that recognised the benefits of both challenging and entering into partnership with institutions such as local councils. Locality's example described a three-year process of mobilising residents and 'hijacking the political process', resulting in the local authority becoming 'an active and supportive partner' (Locality, 2010, p. 6). This indicated the timescale needed to move

from challenge to partnership. Imagine's research (2015a) suggests longer than a year is needed to establish positive relationships with local councils. As our TCOs learnt more about community organising, they became more assertive, mobilising residents at community meetings, they began challenging the local council. However, the lack of time meant TCOs could not move to the 'partnership' phase. HOs consequently saw TCOs as disruptive to good partnership relations and reputations constructed over years. This possibility of risk to reputation and credibility due to involvement in the COP was anticipated by HO managers in the first cohorts (Imagine and Locality, 2012).

TCOs developed their knowledge and came to understand their difficult position of being charged with challenging power. During listenings, some residents discussed concerns regarding local council services. Four TCOs were then challenged by local councillors and officers on newsletters they had circulated expressing such concerns. On occasion, councillors and council officers turned up uninvited to TCO-organised community meetings and undermined the discussions. This was particularly evident when meetings were organising volunteers to carry out work, such as park clean-ups and planting. On one occasion, two TCOs organised residents to tidy some local flower beds. The council, however, refused their offer to carry out the work. When volunteers from the same HO approached the council about the same issue but independently of the TCOs, the council agreed they could go ahead. Turning Alinsky's approach on its head, the local council seemed to resist TCOs and subvert the perceived government-led COP, reasserting itself in the context of funding cuts.

For HOs, this conflict with the local council was problematic. Bunyan (2010) argues that the introduction of broad-based community organising represented an alternative to the 'partnership' and 'empowerment' orthodoxy associated with New Labour policy. This orthodoxy was strongly developed by this Labour council over two decades, though post-2010 austerity undermined its ability to support the VCS. Host managers felt they had been put in difficult positions that threatened their relationships with the local council as councillors regarded HOs accountable for TCOs' actions. Host manager Alex explained:

> '… we've spent the best part of four years building up a strong reputation … some of the activities I would say have really been quite detrimental to that…. I've had to do quite a lot of mopping up behind the scenes because actually, in May, they'll be gone, and I'll still be here.'

Host managers indicated that the conflict and short-term nature of the COP meant that the local council asserted its preference for working with existing and established community groups and

bypassing or ignoring TCO inspired networks, again subverting the COP process. Alex, as illustrated above, concluded that the COP was 'poor community work' as it raised expectations, created conflict and then left the area. TCOs also became conscious of this dilemma and the unrealistic expectation to foster long-lasting change. In the final interviews, all TCOs mentioned the paradox of the short-termism of the COP when trying to explain the limited impact in the area. As Jane explained:

> 'RSLM is supposed to be done over three to five years rather than the year… when [RE:generate trainer] says to build relationships she's kind of come in from a foundation where in the past she's always had three to five years to do that, so the outcomes have been over that amount of time rather than the year.'

Other research indicates that Locality and RE:generate have been equally frustrated by the lack of time to implement RSLM in the way they 'ideally would have liked' (Imagine, 2014, p. 30). In general, our TCOs struggled to navigate community politics and, towards the end of the programme, the relationships between HOs and TCOs were, in some cases, strained and resulted in a lack of progression of the TCOs.

Conclusion

The COP was a state experiment training community organisers. Our case study suggests this resulted in TCOs taking a moderate, pragmatic approach, rather than action that could reasonably be labelled 'radical' or 'revolutionary'. While the style of community organising was new, the contradictions and challenges we set out above are common to community organising strategies (Hunter 2007; Beck and Purcell, 2013). These tensions of working in, against and for the state are perennial issues in community development globally (Shaw, 2011). The COP ~~State-funded training in community organising opened up space for state-funded TCOs to act autonomously, to adapt the methods to their local context, to initiate some community activities and train some volunteers. Although it might not, in our case study, have resulted in such radical endeavor and change as previous state-funded community development programmes (Banks and Carpenter, 2017 Scott, 2017)in the short-term, it is worth notingremarking, however, that we have not explored the long-term legacy of ourthese TCOs. Research suggests that the legacy of COP can only be assessed over the long-term and reminds us that 'movements can start from small steps' (Imagine, 2015a, p.26). That said, tThe government seemed to ignored lessons of previous community programmes, particularly the need for longer timescales to achieve sustainable community engagement and social change. The COP was hampered by the short training period and . The government seemed to ignore lessons of previous community programmes, particularly the need for longer timescales to achieve~~

~~sustainable community engagement and social change.~~ TCOs felt they needed longer to learn the RSLM method (and about other methods of community organising) to be successful. ~~While the style of community organising was new, the contradictions and challenges we set out above are common to community organising strategies (Hunter 2007; Beck and Purcell, 2013). State-funded training in community organising opened up space for TCOs to act autonomously, to adapt the methods to their local context, to initiate some community activities and train some volunteers.~~

The wider context also hindered the COP's potential effectiveness. ~~Within the local context, I~~the neoliberal central government cuts overshadowed the COP~~programme~~ in terms of issues raised by residents, the reactions of the local council and HOs' frustrations with the programme (after their initial optimism) and ~~, as well as~~ the possibility for TCO progression to a second year. Locality's (2010, p. 13) wish to liberate the COP from government and 'disassociate it from public spending cuts' now seems naïve. TCOs in our case study found themselves in an area where the Labour-run local council had already ~~cut~~ reduced its provision for community and youth services due to such cuts ~~to public expenditure~~. It is not surprising ~~then~~ that some in the council ~~appeared to be~~ were resistant to TCOs; ~~who were~~ perceived as imposed by an austerity-driven coalition government. Wider evidence ~~from the programme~~ suggests that Locality was able to maintain its autonomy as the government took a hands-off approach to the COP (Imagine, 2015a; 2014). However, the COP was part of the coalition's neoliberal impulse to bypass local government ~~and reduce 'big government' at the local level~~ by encouraging TCOs ~~seeking~~ to engage residents directly. ~~From this perspective, that~~ TCOs successfully provoked conflict by challenging local councils and HOs but this was short-lived and there is a lack of evidence in this case study of ~~could be viewed as an indicator of success. The lack of evidence of~~ long-lasting mobilisation of residents ~~suggests otherwise~~. TCOs recognised this failure, felt frustrated in their role and with the lack of time to make a difference. There was little evidence in this case study (or nationally (Imagine, 2015a)) of harnessing the potential of community organising to go beyond the local (DeFilippis et al., 2007). There was little focus on the wider social, economic and political structures which featured in previous community development programmes (Green and Chapman, 1992). Nor was there time to forge a more progressive localism hoped for by some; a localism that was 'outward-looking and creates broader solutions and affinities between places and social groups negotiating global processes' (Featherstone et al., 2012, p. 179).

Lessons can be drawn from our case study~~The lessons of our case study are clear~~. The first lesson for policy-makers ~~First,~~ is the delivery of ~~any~~ future programmes requires a longer timescale to allow TCOs to develop their understanding of the method, be able to practice it~~,~~ build relationships~~, ;~~ ~~and~~

establish more sustainable action, and ~~; and then begin to train others~~. A three-year period is ~~seems~~ the minimum requirement. Second, the RSLM method had some positive elements but practitioners need ~~s~~ to ~~be~~ adapt ~~able~~this to~~for~~ ~~to~~ local contexts. P~~;~~ ~~p~~ractitioners also need to be clear that community organising involves both conflict and consensus, and must~~need to~~ be confident about which~~at~~ types of methods are appropriate and when. ~~.~~ Third, the contradiction of being hosted and yet autonomous needs to be reconciled both in policy and practice.~~and~~ TCOs should~~need to~~ be able to work with residents and community groups and HOs as appropriate in their local context. ~~(and HOs) permitted to act fully in accordance with their local context.~~ Fourth, there needs to be a broader understanding of 'community' ~~than was acknowledged in the COP~~, one that incorporates ~~crosses boundaries of~~ class, race and ethnicity, disability, gender and sexuality, as well as geographical and virtual communities. Practitioners also need to learn from previous community development projects and use community organising to develop understanding of the wider social, political and economic causes ~~.~~of local issues .

Our case study provides a detailed insight into the experiences of a group of practitioners involved in the COP and outlines a series of challenges and contradictions, tensions, and possibilities for state funded community organising. The coalition government regarded the COP as a success - targets were exceeded nationally (Cameron et al., 2015) and further funding was announced with several extensions of the programme[ii] . Accumulated evidence suggests there were varied experiences and outcomes apparent across the programme (Cameron et al., 2015; Fisher and Dimberg, 2016; Imagine, 2015a; 2015b). This is unsurprising within community contexts where work can be unpredictable (Meade et al., 2103). While ~~e~~ o~~O~~ur case study ~~exploring the micro-context of practice (Newman and Clarke, 2013)~~ resonates with aspects of national research findings~~of other research findings~~, it ~~but~~ provides a more pessimistic account of COP. Nevertheless, community organising is more widespread in England as a result of the COP and ~~the expansion of~~ alternative approaches, for example, those practiced by Citizens UK and ACORN, which have expanded across English regions. Further research is imperative if we are to understand the long-term legacy of the TCOs trained dur-ing the COP.~~imperative.necessary. will be and the impact the COP has on the everyday lives of citizens.~~

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[i] ACORN – (Arkansas Community Organisations for Reform Now) originated in the USA as an alternative to Alinsky's community organising (Beck and Purcell, 2013). There has been increased interest in ACORN with branches set up across English regions in recent years (see https://acorntheunion.org.uk/).

[ii] ~~Locality also managed~~ Community Mobilisers Fund (2015-17) and Community Organisers Social Action Fund (2014/15). The Community Organisers Expansion programme (2017-2020) is being run by a new membership and training organisation which emerged from the COP - the Company of Community Organisers (COLtd) (https://www.corganisers.org.uk/).